

SANSEI GIRL

The NANCY YOSHIHARA MAYEDA Story

By

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CHAPTER ONE Entering Minidoka

As the bus pulled in through the barbed wire gate, four year old Nancy Yoshihara felt her mother stiffen as they passed a sign at its entrance. "I can't wait to be able to read," young Nancy thought as she saw the other grown ups on board react in the same way. (Illustration of sign at Minidoka: STOP Area limits For persons of Japanese Ancestry residing in this relocation center. SENTRY ON DUTY.)

After the long hot bus ride from Washington State, Nancy could not wait to get off the bus and stretch her legs in Idaho. All the children seemed anxious to do so, but the adults were not as excited to reach their destination. MINIDOKA sounded like a magical Indian village. It did not look like one however; barbed wire ringing a dusty, sagebrush filled flat space with row upon row of barracks, one of which would be their new home.

A young GI stepped on board and told them to gather their belongings and leave the bus. He pointed toward a barracks nearby where they were to wait. Nancy's father took her hand firmly, straightened his shoulders and helped her down the steps of the bus. Mom carried her baby brother Arthur, still sleeping peacefully. Nancy thought he certainly had traveled many miles in his short life.

Nancy knew that all the *Nisei* and *Sansei*, the first and second generation Japanese Americans in her town had been moved from their homes to "Camp Harmony." The Puyallup racetrack north of Seattle had served as their "assembly center." There they had lived for three months in shoddy barracks and horse stalls that had been left unclean. President Roosevelt had signed an "Executive Order" which said they could no longer live near the coast in Washington state, Oregon and California.

He was afraid they might try to help the country of Japan win the war they were fighting against America.

They had to leave behind all their furniture and many belongings, packing only what they could carry. Mother said they were lucky. Since they lived in company housing in the lumber camps of National, Washington, they were not leaving behind a house that might be sold or even given away. Many others were losing much more than they. The greatest blessing was that father was still with them. Many families were coming without their fathers; if they worked in the government, communications or were leaders of the Japanese American community like church men, they were sent to Montana or Santa Fe to be watched more closely.

Now, as they waited in line to register and receive their "apartment" assignments at Minidoka, Nancy hoped her family's new quarters would not smell of horses. The stench had been almost unbearable at Puyallup.

"Family number 17766? You're in Block 8, Section 9, barrack D," said the young man to Father as they came up to the front of the line. "Go to the laundry room for the physician's inspection; a guide will take you from there to your apartment assignment. Wait there for your beds and bedding."

"I hope Marian will be near us," thought Nancy, straining to catch a glimpse of her older cousin. "It would be nice if our families could be close to each other." Her mother had said that her cousin's family would arrive in camp first from Puyallup, and would try to arrange for them to be placed near each other.

Her mother interrupted her thoughts as she came close to whisper in her ear. "Remember that Nancy. You must always remember where we are. Block 8, Section 9, barrack D. 8 9 D. I don't want you to get lost."

Nancy looked down at her shoes, now covered in hot dry dust, and at the numbered tag on the button of her blouse. Family 17766. 8, 9, D. Now they were numbers.

CHAPTER TWO **Life At Camp**

"Drink all of your milk, Nancy," her mother insisted. Then more quietly to Aunt Akitsu, "If they think we don't drink it, they may stop giving it to us." Meals at camp were certainly different now that they were living at Minidoka. Smelt and beets seemed always to be on the menu for dinner, and cream of wheat for breakfast. It was all Nancy could do to swallow it without gagging. The one treat they were given was the one cookie Nancy never could abide - ginger snaps. Meals were served in the Mess hall, or Dining hall. Nancy thought Mess a more apt description. Everyone sat at large tables crowded with every family in camp. The teenagers had started to sit together away from their families, and Nancy knew the parents were upset.

The barracks were made of slatted wood, and covered by tar paper. There were many families in each barrack, and their "apartments" were only separated by a thin piece of sheetrock. If Arthur and Nancy ever quarreled, Mother would quickly shush them, and they could in turn hear every one else's sound.

So far, the hardest adjustment was that the barracks had no bathroom. In fact, there were no toilets in the whole camp, only outhouses. The staff said the toilets would be coming soon, but until then they had to adjust. This meant that families with young children like Nancy had to utilize old fashioned "chamber pots" in the apartments - ceramic pots for waste that needed to then be washed out after each use. The only time Nancy's mother seemed impatient with camp life was when Nancy suddenly had to go to the bathroom as they were all settling down for sleep - it meant another trip to the outhouse for her mother, and another scrubbing out of the pot before she could rest. In winter, it was a bitter cold trek, and Nancy was determined to try to be more conscious of "waiting 'til the last minute." She couldn't wait to be more grown up, in so many ways. "You could start by helping more with Arthur," her

mother had said when Nancy expressed her wish one evening. *There must be SOMETHING I can do that is more than THAT*, she thought. *But what?* The question swirled around and around her brain as she finally fell to sleep.

CHAPTER THREE **First Day of School**

“Hurry, Nancy! You’ll be late! You are always so busy playing school - now you have the chance to go - let’s be on time!!”

Mother was right. Even here in Minidoka Nancy was always playing school. When she could not get paper, she used a stick to scratch in the dust behind the barracks, “teaching” her little brother all he could possibly want to know. The other younger children would soon gather, and Nancy would have a full complement of students. But Nancy was reluctant to go to her first day of real school. Her mother had always kept her close, and now Nancy just wanted to stay home.

“Nancy!” Her mother called again. She was at the door of the barrack waiting for Nancy to straighten up from tying her shoe. She had already tied it twice, she could not stall her mother any longer. Together they hurried out into the harsh sunshine, blinking in the hot morning light.

As they passed the rows of living quarters on their way to the school barrack, Nancy felt nervous. Though her new “hometown” was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by men in towers with real guns, it had become home to her. She was used to eating now in the mess hall with the whole camp together. She had almost forgotten dinners at National when it was just their family alone.

But now she was going to school - another new world. She walked alongside her mother the few blocks to the entrance, holding back her tears of fright.

Once inside, Nancy looked around. Benches with long tables were set up in rows. The teacher stood at one end and beckoned the children to sit.

“Good morning children. I am Miss Hessler. Welcome to your Minidoka school. You may hang your sweaters on the back of your chair.”

Nancy was already perspiring in her light cotton dress - who would bring a

sweater to school on a day like this? She looked at the teacher in awe. She could not wait to learn! But she was so nervous she started to cry. It would take her a while to get used to this real school. She cried so hard and long, the school called her mother to pick her up.

“Nancy only wants to be the teacher! She doesn’t want to be a lowly student!” chuckled one of the women in the barracks that night.

“But she will be a student...and a good one,” her mother responded, and gave Nancy a serious look.

The next day, her mother dropped her back at the schoolroom as before and assured Nancy that today she must stay. Nancy tried to find a way to settle into this environment she longed for, but was frightened of. Miss Hessler was very kind and spoke gently to her as she guided her to her seat.

Nancy watched how the teacher opened her book to take attendance and learn the names of the new students and thought being a teacher must be the most wonderful job in the world. It was the only thing she wanted to be when she grew up.

She also knew it would be difficult to get a job. Her aunts had graduated ten years before as teachers, and still were not allowed to teach in public schools. But as her father always said, “Do what you LIKE, but do it the best you can. Somehow there will be a way.” What she LIKED was teaching!

Slowly she became used to the student role, and actually loved school, especially helping the other students! She found if she paid attention and did her work quickly, she was able to be a helper in the classroom. When acting in this role, she felt most comfortable and sure that teaching was in her future. But learning was her present!

CHAPTER FOUR A Change is Coming

The grey winter light filtered through the high windows in the barracks, and did nothing to entice Nancy from beneath her military blanket, wrapped around her like a cocoon on her cot. As scratchy and rough as it was, it still provided the only warmth in this chilly room.

She could hear others in the barracks moving around to start their day, but she wanted to move slowly on this cold January morning. It was a bitter month of freezing temperatures at Minidoka, and she could not wait for spring.

"Spring!" her mother had exclaimed when Nancy shared her longing. "We have only just had Christmas!"

It had been a festive season, with peppermints and presents in the mess hall, and even a visit from Santa! Her father had brought in a branch from outdoors, and they had propped it in the corner, decorated with paper trimmings. It had been merry indeed, but her father had been restless of late. There was much talk of "moving back" and "moving on" and Nancy felt unsettled by the discussions.

"Come quickly! They just put up the notices!" A young man whose family lived in the barracks with Nancy's burst through the door, letting in a blast of frigid air. "Come see, it's true!"

Nancy's father threw on his winter coat and walked quickly outside with the other grown ups. There was a notice tacked to the bulletin board outside their door. Someone was reading it aloud to those in the back of the crowd. "Japanese Resettlement Restrictions on Coast Lifted."

"What does it mean, Daddy?" asked Nancy when her father returned inside.

Quietly he replied, "It means we can leave here and go home if we want."

"You mean home to National?" asked Nancy.

Her father looked up. "It means home to wherever we choose to live." He exchanged glances with Mom as she turned to Nancy.

"They must feel the end of the war is near! Soon it will all return to normal."

Nancy wondered what exactly that meant. Minidoka had been the only home her little brother had ever known, so THAT was normal to him. She felt comfortable here, she had friends, she liked school. What would NORMAL feel like?

Nancy hurried to get on her warmest clothes so she could run outside. There was a large crowd now around the notice and she wanted to hear what everyone was saying. As she opened the door to exit, and was hit by that brisk arctic-like air, she hoped their next destination would be a warmer one.

CHAPTER FIVE Exit to Anderson Dam

Now that the Executive Order had been lifted, Nancy's father was excited to tell them of his new opportunity - and of their new home.

"My welding skills are required to build a new dam near Twin Falls, Idaho. It is good work and we are lucky to have it. There will even be a house for us!"

"Oh," Nancy thought, "A real house again!" As they once again packed their things in boxes labeled with their family's number, Nancy wished a silent hope. "Maybe at Anderson Dam, we will just be the Yoshiharas again."

Saying goodbye to Marian and her family was difficult. They would go out to San Francisco while Nancy's family rode the bus to the new community to build the dam.

"When the dam is finished, we should be all settled in San Francisco. We will call you to come over," Nancy's aunt assured her mother as they said goodbye.

The ride to Anderson Dam was long, hot and dry. Their "house" was a small cabin with no amenities; but with her mother's deft touch inside, and her father's skills outside, they soon had extra rooms for more space.

Nancy's brother Arthur also soon had a highly coveted item thanks to her father's welding skills - a tricycle! No one else in the new camp had such a luxury. They soon found this new location was also very hot in summer and cold in winter, with temperatures so extreme the metal tricycle was often too uncomfortable to sit on!

As the men worked on the dam each day, the children found ways to amuse themselves. Nancy once again found herself "teaching" school to a whole new crop of students. But, as at Minidoka, only the Japanese families lived in Nancy's area of the builder's camp. The European workers were housed in a different site. Though no barbed wire separated them now, Nancy felt the fences between them were just as

strong.

Each week, the children would watch for the supply truck, making its way down the dusty hillside, bringing its precious cargo of peppermints, popsicles and the always enticing, ever rare, BANANA! Was there ever such a delicious treat as that sweet fruit? And it came in its own special package!

Life went on in this way for more than a year, until the day her father came home and brought the big news. "The dam will be all finished in less than a month, and it is time to move on."

CHAPTER SIX **The City by the Bay Beckons**

Marian's family had called them, and now it was time to go. The Mitsunagas had stayed in a church when they first arrived in San Francisco. "Where will *we* sleep?" worried Nancy one day while she and her mother once again packed their things to leave. Nancy wondered about a lot of things - what would it be like in a big city to live? Would people be nice to them? Would Japanese people have to live in a separate area there too?

"We will stay in their new house with them," said her mother, as she carefully wrapped what possessions they would take. "Lots of families are doing just the same thing. We are lucky to have family in the area - we have a place to go to." Nancy marveled that at each moment in their lives when there was the most change and unknown possibilities ahead, both her parents always pointed to the reason that THEY were lucky!

"It will be a very long bus ride, however, so I will need you and Arthur to be patient with one another."

Another long bus ride! It seemed to Nancy her young life was punctuated with long bus rides, taking her to a new life each time. As she packed her few precious books and personal treasures, her mother glanced over at her and smiled.

"When we get to San Francisco, you will be able to have a banana every day if you want one!"

Did she ever! That was even worth trying to get along with Arthur the whole way there! She picked up the pace of her packing, and looked forward to the adventure ahead.

THE END

EPILOGUE

After her family's internment at Minidoka, Nancy Yoshihara Mayeda moved to San Francisco and attended public school there. Her father Minoru Yoshihara became the first Japanese American to join the welder's union. Nancy went on to live her dream as a classroom teacher for eleven years at Argonne Elementary, then went into administration and teacher development. In 1982, she became the principal of Rooftop Elementary, an alternative school in the SF Unified School District. Nancy Mayeda created a staff and parent community at this public school which transformed it into a model in the state for its diversity of ethnicity and socio-economics. Rooftop Elementary was the recipient of the BEST SCHOOL IN CALIFORNIA award from Redbook Magazine in 1993 and became a California Distinguished School. When Rooftop was extended to the 8th grade in 1996, SFUSD bestowed its highest honor on Mrs. Mayeda by naming the new middle school campus the NANCY YOSHIHARA MAYEDA site.

Though officially retired in 1998, Nancy Yoshihara Mayeda continues her diligent and energetic work on behalf of teachers and children throughout the Bay Area. She still lives in San Francisco with her husband Jack Mayeda, a beloved and influential educator; their daughter Stacy is a Lowell High School Hall of Fame athlete. Nancy remains an inspiration to all who know her.